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Video Rental Store

An Interview with Suzanne Carte-Blanchenot and Su-Ying Lee

Mél Hogan

The following is an interview with Suzanne Carte-Blanchenot and Su-Ying Lee, a collective of cultural producers working in contemporary art under the moniker MUSE. MUSE is a collaborative project that places experimental strategies at the forefront of their creative process and practice, which stems from over ten years of combined experience as artists, curators, programmers, educators, and administrators. MUSE's launch of Under New Management's *Video Rental Store* in Toronto, Canada from August 2-15, 2010, is part of a larger project that hybridizes exhibition-based practices and experiential methods examining the relationship between art and its vast milieu.

As made evident by the project's name, *Video Rental Store* takes on the video store as a space for distributing video art, facilitating audience participation, and determining or contesting value through the honor system. Following a pay-what-you-wish model, audiences are invited to contribute whatever they

deem appropriate, the sum of which is forwarded directly to artists. Video exchanges happen during hours of operation as by the traditional video store definition.

This interview focuses on the space of the video store and its potential for generating new modes of thinking about value through alternative economies. Situated somewhere between old school bartering philosophies and new school debates about file sharing online, the *Video Rental Store* project exist as an experiment that utilizes the video store as metaphor for the circulation of culture.



Mél Hogan: Tell me what inspired this idea of “video rental store.” Who is behind this project? How did it start? Where does it end?

Su-Ying Lee: The video rental store is part of a larger project—a group exhibition in stages. The project does not take place in a gallery; instead it uses a retail space as a platform. We capitalize on some of the characteristics associated with such a space. Hence, the video portion of the exhibition as rental.

There exist parallels in the identities of artists and curators as producers and viewers as consumers. The physical context of the project allows us to further make visible those aspects of our respective roles. This is also an experiment about value, trust, and generosity, which involves

exchange between the artist and the viewer. The viewer borrows the video work on an honor system basis. They are asked to return it within a certain “rental period” with payment. The payment portion is open-ended. They pay what they wish. We accept non-monetary exchange for rental. There is a chance that the viewer may not return the work at all and there will be no penalty for this. The artists participate with the understanding that there is the element of risk. This may yield disappointment or delight.

Suzanne Carte-Blanchenot: The project is never-ending in regards to idea generation and potential for future iterations.

MH: When you sent out the call for videos for this project, it was open to everyone. You were hoping to receive hundreds of videos to “keep the store shelves stocked.” How many videos did you receive? How close are you to achieving passable video rental store status?

SC-B: The call for submissions was distributed through a number of different venues including our own email lists, visual art and performance art listservs, and universities. We also solicited work directly from artists that we regularly work with and admire to ensure their participation in the store/exhibition. No video was ever turned away. If work of a sexual or violent nature was submitted we made note on the cases, which were fabricated by our Exhibition Assistant, Katherine Hong. This notation was not done to censor but was in keeping with commercial video rental store policies regarding age appropriateness.

In the end we had 35 artists participate in the project contributing over 65 videos. I would have liked to see more in the collection to reflect the capacity that a commercial rental store has on its shelves, but time, resources, and exhibition space dictated those numbers. As it was our first time, some artists were uncertain of what to make of the distribution of their work in that manner and if it would be a successful venture. I think that with the next store—due to the overwhelmingly positive response to the concept and execution—will garner a broader response from artists interested in participating. It will break down the barrier of having to explain the project in a “what if?” scenario and established the credibility of the endeavor.



MH: Something about it feels like it is mimicking virtual file sharing, which itself derives from ideas of lending libraries and video stores, etc. Any thoughts on that loop? What is the importance of doing this project “offline”?

S-YL: I hadn't considered the similarity to file sharing. I think the difference is that online the files are not willingly shared by the creator. They are appropriated and distributed without consent. For the *Video Rental Store* we are receiving works from the artist directly. The artists' participation is their choice and an act of generosity or perhaps curiosity about how their works will be received and responded to. There is, however, the possibility that the work will be continuously shared since the artist is relinquishing control.

SC-B: I do see the project as a continuous loop of sharing through not only the video rental, but with the other stores that are set up as exhibitions. Allowing the work of artists to be made visible in arenas outside of a gallery space.

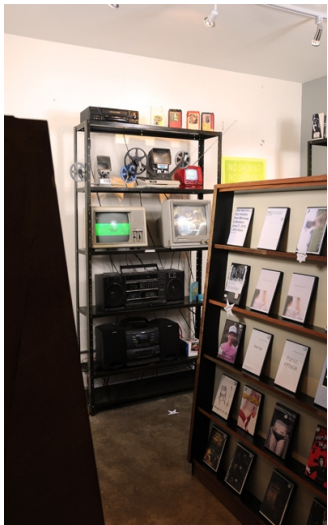
Since so much of our daily interactions are mediated through the digital means (social, work, commerce and research) it is an opportunity to have a “real” meeting experience with a physical element of the video.

The importance of doing this offline is the human interaction, the experience of making a selection through conversation with the attendant. I used to

work in a video rental store (years and years ago) and know how the act of going to the store, roaming through the isles, grabbing junk food, and ruminating over the new releases is part of the performance of preparing for a night in.

How many times have you asked a video store clerk for assistance in choosing films or deciphering content? You can hear patrons always ask, “Hey, is this good?” With downloads there is no dialogue other than a blog situation where the advice is easy to discredit because it could be anyone (anyone meaning it could be a avid film buff, an action seeker, a melodramatic lover, a viewer with potentially dissimilar interests, or with sophisticated, discerning taste)!

The larger project speaks to bringing back the mom-and-pop shops of another generation that conjures up a nostalgic of simplicity of knowing your service provider. It is about being part of a community and supporting the local businesses that are the face of the neighborhood, not part of a larger online jungle.



MH: You mentioned that Video 99 closed down and as a result provided you with their store fixtures. Do you have any thoughts on video stores closing down, largely as a result of online distribution?

SC-B: It was a happy/sad moment (and one coated in a bit of guilt as it is less than a block away from me and I never rented there). The project is an independent one and we relied heavily on the community to come to rescue us (or play with us) to make the shop happen. With limited financial resources we gave ourselves the task of creating four different shops/exhibitions. This could not have been done without the support of the arts councils, local retailers, brewers, photographers, artists, designers, galleries, production houses, and friends. We had to constantly walk around with our hand out and found that retailers, suppliers and our landlords were very eager to assist in making the project a reality. Video 99 was integral to the success and believability of the video rental store by generously donating the cases, shelving units, and marquee. All of which would have been prohibitive for us if we had to pay retail prices for the store fixtures that fabricated the structure of the exhibition.

The unfortunate demise of this independent rental store that saw over ten years of activity on that street is the sad part. I think that it fuels the discussion that we are trying to engage with in regards to the temporality that is becoming a disturbing reality in the downtown core as the rotating door of independent stores are giving way to larger franchised stores.

MH: Would something similar work online?

S-YL: For our purposes, this would not work online since it is one component of a larger project. Online, it would be out of context.

MH: I submitted my video for the store in two formats—one as an authored DVD that plays when you insert it into a DVD player or computer, and another version as a “data” DVD so people can copy it if they want. Is that wrong or is the project intentionally open for interpretation?

S-YL: I hadn't considered that option/interpretation. I think it's brave and generous! Since this entire project is in many ways an experiment, we'd love to have artists interpret it in various ways. Your method enhances the project. If we are able to accommodate ideas that do so, we will.

SC-B: No, it is definitely not wrong. However, how the user of your work

chooses to “work” with the content in the privacy of their home is truly unknowable. We have given no restrictions and understand that there is the possibility of theft both intellectually and economically.

MH: Am I mistakenly reading into this project a critique about the arguments around the threats to culture and art when you leave it in the hands of the people rather than industry?

S-YL: The “industry” I’d be familiar with in relation to this project would be commercial galleries, distributors, and the fees artists command for the exhibition, use, and sale of their work which extends to copyright and reproduction. I tend to support the artists in that whatever the level of control the artist wishes over how their creation/work is used and disseminated and the compensation they receive should be their decision.

This is not a critique about that argument. It is an experiment, largely about milieu. Having worked within institutions, I certainly am critical of some aspects of the way in which they function. But, this is more an inquiry into my own role as a curator, how that is realized and whether curators and art are legitimized by the context of the gallery.

I don’t feel we’re subverting the idea of customer or consumer but we are making transparent the parallels between viewer and consumer. Consumerism is an everyday occurrence in most of our lives. We are aligning art with the everyday.

MH: Can you explain this idea of the everyday in relation to *Video Rental Store* recreating the space of the video store as retail outlet rather than, say, happening within the space of an existing video store?

SC-B: That is exactly it. These exhibitions are the everyday. People consume everyday. We are a culture whose primary pastime is consumption. Shopping is the number one leisure activity. That is where the success of the exhibition lies in bringing in a non-art based audience. The commercial presentation, or serial arrangements were familiar and brought in people off of the street, yet there was something queer.

I was in the rental store one night to hear a group of people outside talking

about the space. One of them said, “Oh ya this is that joke store.” From inside I exclaimed, “We are not a joke!” It made them laugh and brought them into the exhibition to discuss the project in greater detail, seeing that in fact we were no joke, we *were* renting videos. They ended up taking a couple videos home.

If we were to rent a couple shelves at a commercial rental location or infiltrate their merchandising the project could get lost and I could not guarantee that the sales representatives would be respectful to the artists’ work. It would also get confusing as to what was a rental of an infinite amount of time for any form of payment and what was the location’s videos that have a predetermined rental policy dictating duration and price.

MH: How does this speak to the relationship of art—its circulation and value?

S-YL: Again, I would say this relates to context. Galleries and museums assign and reflect a value system to art in the way that the spaces are designed, the proportion of space allotted to collections and exhibitions, geographic representation, historical representation, genres, etc. It can be argued that values are reflected in any exhibition in the installation design and placement of work.

Institutions are seen as authoritative. Museums and galleries can choose to sanction or challenge prescribed histories or even write history.

Are we (artists, curators, viewers) reliant on the context of the gallery? This is the inquiry we are making.

MH: I am assuming this is a social project about distribution and sharing—is there something about video’s history in particular, its art history and activist roots, that informs the politics of this project?

S-YL: Video art is conducive to the project because of the way in which people understand DVDs as a commodity and access video regularly through retail and rental. We are presenting video through appropriation of that model.

MH: In what way is this also an experiment between curators and

artists and audiences? Is it putting the honor system to a test? Where does the idea of an “honor system” come from?

S-YL: This project crosses the boundaries of how art is conventionally presented and consumed. Expectations are destabilized, creating an opportunity for exchange not typically available in each of those roles.

The idea of an honor system and pay-what-you-want compensation come from our work in an institution. Suzanne and I worked at a public art gallery where she was the Outreach Programmer and I was Assistant Curator. Our ideas evolved during this time through issues arising from working within the context of a public institution and an examination of our respective roles. Giving consideration to the many targeted efforts of galleries which include increasing visitor numbers and introducing the institution and contemporary art to new audiences, there was often the question of how to measure success and how to derive audience feedback. The honor system is an unscientific reflection of the value audiences place on the work. It is an inexact alternative to audience surveys and statistics, which we suspect to be equally inexact.

SC-B: Yes, an experiment of trust with all three! The artists trust that we (the curators) only have the best intentions to properly represent their work. The curators trust the general public to be respectful and return the work undamaged so that it can go into other homes for viewing and eventually be returned to the artist. The audience trusts that the artists and curators are going to give them something of quality and substance for their time invested. So it truly is a system of honoring all of players involved to make the cycle complete.

MH: How do you anticipate value being attributed to works? Do you foresee people exchanging video for video?

S-YL: People typically understand payment to be money. So, I suspect people will pay what they might normally pay for a video rental, or they will pay nothing because we enjoy receiving things free. It is my hope that by making non-monetary exchange an option, creative alternatives to expressing value will be found. A formerly unavailable avenue is opened for both artists and viewers. Video for video would be amazing in that it becomes a dialogue.

SC-B: We saw the non-monetary exchange of this project as a way for the audience to question the value of cultural production. In [many] way[s], value has already been prescribed. We (I can only speak from a Canadian perspective) would never question the purchase of tickets to a film, rent[ing] a Hollywood video in a commercial outlet, and the bills for accessing various television programming for our home entertainment, but [we] would [question paying to] gain access to a municipal public art gallery. In turning the exhibition structure around to physically mimic that of a commercial venture, it forces the viewer to perform the same act of going to the counter and inquiring about payment. They are then forced to ask themselves, "What would I pay for the opportunity to view an artist's work?"

Ideally, I wanted to see the exchange of video for video, or ideas in the way of a written critique for the artist, or resource sharing and voluntary time for viewing pleasure, or a work [responding] to [and] complement[ing] the ideas brought forward in the original video. We were curious to see how patrons and/or users approach the honour system. We (and the participating artists) are making a grand optimistic gesture, testing assumptions about the general public's generosity.

Yet we had to be wary of the other end of the spectrum, gluttony. North Americans have the tendency to grab anything that is being offered as "free." Here is a perfect example: I grabbed a pair of the ugliest, cheapest sunglasses this summer on the street during the Montreal Pride festival from a TD bank booth. I got back to the hotel and immediately wanted to throw them out. Why the hell had I grabbed them? Why did the girl in the green shirt (other than she was cute) waving a pair of sunglasses appeal to me so much? They were free, free, free. That is all really. I got caught up in the frenzy of my brain telling me to take, take, take. Feeling guilty, I actually wore them later that week (yes, Su-Ying, I am ashamed to say it is true).

So we had to be careful about our wording and not waive a banner stating "Free Videos" but instead ask them to contemplate the value of the artists' work and to spend time looking through the selection for works that may interest them rather than a "smash and grab" looting mentality.

Theatres and some galleries test the pay-what-you-wish system often to open up their audiences, breaking down the perceived access deterrent of

admission costs. I wonder if a study has ever been done of what the average of what we want to pay ... and in the end it is really not paying what we can ... but what we want.

But ... Everything that we want is free, anyway.

MH: Can you reflect on how the project worked? What was most surprising?

SC-B: After all of the stress of the fundraising and coordination, the most surprising part was to see it actually happen!

The project has worked out better than I could have ever hoped for! The videos are flying off the shelves and we have received very considered and thoughtful responses to the work and the concept of the exhibition. On behalf of the participating artists we have received money, tomatoes, cookies, books, film tickets, letters, stickers, and a hand-embroidered bag.

MH: How was the project received by the community? And who constitutes the community?

SC-B: The word community is thrown around with reckless abandon (I too am guilty of it at times). Within this project it has a shared meaning of artists, retailers/store owners, consumers, and neighbors.

Sometimes I use it in reference to proximity or a group with shared interests, ideals, political motivations, or social circles. Our location is perfectly situated off of the main Queen West strip on Gore Vale facing Trinity Bellwoods Park. So when we allude to our “community” in relation to locality it is very broad. The park attracts a disparate mélange of users, who become our primary audience. Walking through the recreational space you will see families, tennis players, musicians, artists, lovers, friends, runners, hipsters, elderly, youth, homeless, dog-walkers, and tourists. It truly feels like the most general public.

Even though I mentioned earlier the craziness that happens around “free stuff” we did not experience that at all. Every patron was very respectful or the “stores” and our pay-what-you-wish policy about almost anything. Yet

there was a distrust from the general public that I was not anticipating. Consumers are always told “there is no such thing as free” so they can be a tentative bunch when given complimentary items or goods.

We held a grand opening on the first Saturday that Under New Management opened. Mill Street Brewery and a donor, David Saffer, graciously sponsored the event. With that support we were able to have a barbecue in front of the exhibition site offering free beer, hotdogs and snacks. With a smoking barbecue outside of the space I was certain that we would be overrun with people that were enjoying the park in the afternoon. Instead, our “customers” were leery of accepting the free food and drink and we found ourselves being quite insistent that they partake.

Overall, the response has been amazing and the best and most touching part of this entire project has been getting to know that community. It has affected me more than I ever thought that it would.

MH: I think traditional video stores sometimes sell off old works when they close down. What will come of the videos after the show comes down? Will these videos be sold, sent back, or archived?

SC-B: The work will be given back to the artist at the end of the exhibition as well as a package including the payments that they received, images, press, UNM swag, a letter outlining how many people rented the work, as well as a huge thank you for making the project a success and honoring us with their work.

In the initial call for submissions, artists were made aware that they may not get their work back. This would only be the case if they were not returned by a renter. It would be great to archive them for future stores, but at this point we do not have another venue in sight (or the financial means to do it again soon) and I would prefer that the artists decide whether they would like to participate again rather than us taking their work “on the road.”

Suzanne Carte-Blanchenot is an Assistant Curator at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) with prime responsibilities for exhibition coordination and student outreach. Previously she held the positions as outreach